2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER XXX

DANCING

● 535 DANCING, though an accomplishment in which every Burmese man or woman is more or less proficient, is, as elsewhere in the East, never carried on simply for personal amusement. That custom, together with the elaboration of the two sexes dancing in couples, is entirely a Western invention. If a great man wants dancing he hires people to do it for him. If indeed he becomes greatly excited at a boat-race, a buffalo fight, or a religious procession on its way through the town to the pagoda, he may tuck up his paso tightly round his thighs and caper away till his bare legs tire, but he does so ordinarily with a ludicrously solemn aspect, as if the performance were a part of his official duties, and to be got through with as much stately dignity as the dispensing of justice from the magisterial bench. It is a concession to the excitability of his nature, and he would be very much offended if next day, when he had calmed down to his ordinary composed demeanour, an Englishman were to compliment him on the agility he displayed, or the complexity of his evolutions on the previous day.

With the young people it is different, but only to a certain extent. Most of them, if they have any aptitude that way, practise dancing for the sake of the applause and admiration it may get for them when they perform in a village procession, at the initiation of a young friend into a monastery, or at one of the great religious feasts, such as Tawadein-tha, or even at a funeral. But as a general rule no lessons are taken other than watching noted performers. The ambitious usually confine themselves to practise in out-

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of-the-way places by themselves, trusting to natural ability and good ear to help them in the harmonious movement of head, limbs, and body, to the sound of the music. The women who dance as professionals in the plays have to go through a very rigorous course, not that there are any complicated steps to be learnt, but that they may acquire the pliancy of body necessary for the indiarubber contortions into which they have to writhe their bodies. 535 ●

There are therefore no distinctions of dances, according to regular varieties of movements. These are pretty well regulated both by professionals and amateurs according to individual fancy. If such a thing as an "encore" existed in Burma, it would probably puzzle the dancer to repeat the step exactly as it has been gone through before. This of course refers to individual dancing, and does not by any means apply to the yein pwès, where a carefully-trained troupe goes through pre-arranged movements with well-drilled precision. There may be said to be really only two kinds of dancing: individual, or it might almost be called irresponsible dancing, such as is seen in the plays and at various religious or social ceremonies; and the yein pwès, the figure, or "country" dances, where much practice and working together is imperatively necessary. A zatôk, or theatre manager, will tell you that there are four or perhaps five kinds; the dancing of the zat pwè, the regular drama; that of the yāma zat (the Ramayana), which is of a much wilder and more energetic character; the dancing of the anyeinthama, the trained companies of ballet-dancers, who perform in the palace before the king and princes to the sound of the pattala, the harp, or the flute. These are simply glorified yeins, and the *danseuses* are often most gorgeously dressed with gilded pyramidal crowns, and wings on their legs. Fourthly, there is the bônshe pwè, a performance of much the same kind, except that it is gone through to the music of the instrument of that name, a long kettle-drum-like thing, much the same as the tom-tom of India. This latter variety is considered old-fashioned, and is not often seen now, notwithstanding that it is called Byaw, after the great Thabinwun, who was particularly fond of it. The fifth style of dancing, according to the player's idea, is the performance

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● 535 of the ordinary domestic youth on festive occasions, when he prances about like an extremely self-conscious turkey-cock in the style that suits his capabilities best.

There are a great variety of names for special dances, but in all there is the same waving of hands and weaving of paces. The hands, fingers, elbows, and shoulders are twisted about as if they were circular-jointed; the legs are doubled up and extended in the same fantastic and tentacular fashion, while the body seems to wind and bend in any direction with equal facility. Europeans as a rule find nothing to admire in the dancing except the marvellous sensitiveness to time, and the extreme tension in which every muscle of the body is constantly kept. The solemnity of face is paralleled by the expression of the waltzer who is convinced that he is becoming giddy.

535 562 Little though the dancing of the men resembles European saltation, that of the girls is still farther from active motion and definitive figures. This is no doubt in great part due to the Burmese female dress. The tamein is simply a square cloth folded round the body and tucked in so that the opening is down the front. This necessitates some adroitness even in walking, and renders all active motions incompatible with modesty. When they dance the skirt is sewn or pinned down the front, so that the girl is, as it were, in a narrow bag, reaching down to her feet and trailing about on the ground in an eighteen-inch or two-foot train. Even thus hampered their dances are much more animated than those of the Indian nautch girls, but still do not go greatly beyond posturing. Nevertheless, the natural and graceful attitudes into which they throw the body, and the cleverness with which they manœuvre their hands and arms, so different from European awkwardness with these members, is not without a charm. It is quite a common thing to see a girl bend over backwards till her lips touch the mat upon which she stands, and pick up from the ground rupees thrown there by the spectators. In Mandalay I have seen a performer double up all her members, head and all, into a space represented by the length of her trunk, and compact enough to be put into an ordinary-sized portmanteau.

The zatthamă, the professional actresses, usually dance

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to their own singing and often improvise with wonderful cleverness, when performing before a celebrity, or any one whom it is especially desired to honour. Many of them acquire a reputation that extends all over the country, and are often sought for in vain by the wealthiest play-goers. Chief among them was the Yindaw Ma Le, the "Mandalay Diva," who was known to every English official or man of importance who visited Mandalay during the twenty years before the annexation. Unlike most Eastern women, she kept remarkably well, and though her voice failed latterly, she made up as well as she did nearly twenty years before, when she sang in Amarapoora, the City of the Immortals. There were few Englishmen who saw her perform before Lord Mayo in Rangoon—she was sent down specially from Mandalay by King Mindôn for that purpose—who could have believed that she was then close on forty. The want of a national court no doubt prevents any other dancer from taking the place which she has left for ever.

An accomplishment greatly affected by the coryphées is the extraordinary faculty of moving local muscles, the remainder of the body being perfectly quiet. Many of the men, especially the clowns of the piece, can do the same thing, but it is usually brought in by them only as a mockery of the lady. She will extend the arms alternately and cause the muscles to rise and fall and twitch so vigorously that it may be seen yards off. Similarly the bosom heaves as if violently agitated by passion or exertion, while the face remains perfectly impassive.

These displays are all, however, comparatively uninteresting to foreigners. The posturing and waving of hands, however graceful and supple, become tiresome, and the more so the oftener they are seen. But it is different with the yein pwè, the choral dances, which are very often executed by amateurs, and imply considerable skill and long practice under competent instructors. The *coup d'œil* is very attractive, and the effect of the different groupings quite as good as anything to be seen in the incidental ballet of the European stage, while the brilliance of the dresses and the ebbing and flowing chorus of the dancers add to the picturesqueness of the whole. The yein flourishes most in small villages, where

2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
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535 the most promising of the youth of both sexes are taken in charge by a skilled sayā, who trains them assiduously together until they have attained perfection. Even in these dances the sexes do not mingle. There are meimma yein and yaukya yein, the former usually eschewing complex movements, and sitting in rows on the ground, richly decked with bracelets, and dalizan necklaces falling over their silken vests or tight-fitting lace bodices. The dancing consists of the usual pirouetting, or perhaps it ought to be called winding, on both feet, with much serpentine movements of the arms and the head. The loosening of the elbow-joint is greatly practised by Burmese girls with a view to these performances, and also under the impression that it is elegant in itself. From early years the arm is so manipulated that the forearm can be bent back so as to form a curve outwards, and this accomplishment is steadily exhibited on all occasions in public by a belle who has acquired it. Very often the meimma yein is performed by a body of girls, who succeed one another in successive groups. All are seated at first. The chorus is led by a woman, who herself does not dance, and is usually the instructress of the troupe. She begins in a low recitative gradually swelling until at last the first group rise and go through a stately performance. They are succeeded by the next row, who are more lively in their movements, and so on to the last, who are usually young girls, and are much more rapid and varied in their figures than their elder predecessors. Finally, all join in some complicated evolutions, and finish up seated in some pre-arranged figure. But as a rule the meimma yeins, though pretty enough as a mere spectacle, have not sufficient action to redeem them from the accusation of tiresome sameness brought against individual dancing, and they are always so discreet that they might be performed by Sunday-school teachers.

535 562 533 In the men's dances it is different. At the commencement all are seated, four or five in the front row, and forming a column of perhaps ten or more rows. The conductor gives the sign and all bow down with closed hands raised to the forehead in salutation to the great man in whose honour the dance is given. Then they begin singing in

2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 APl Burma
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chorus in the usual way. The song treats in a rambling way of the past history of the village, its ancient glories and heroes; its victories in boat-races, boxing matches, or mains of cocks. Interpolated are catch phrases for the guidance of the dancers. At a certain word all spring to their feet; they sway to the right, to the left; white handkerchiefs are drawn from the belt and waved to the measure of the refrain, peeled white wands replace them; they pirouette simultaneously, they troop round in procession in movements resembling figures in the Lancers or the Haymakers, the time varying with the measure of the song, dying away in plaintive sounds almost to quiescence, and then suddenly rising to excited movement of every limb as the words tell of a let-pwè, in which some local hero of the fancy did glorious deeds, or a fight long years ago when the village spearmen carried the day. Then the measure changes again, the alterations in time being always heralded by some such refrain as to yein daw tha, le maung yo wa, a kind of warning hung out after the manner of the first word of a military command. Occasionally, a yein troupe which has acquired particular skill and renown travels about the country on special invitation. Rangoon is often supplied with its "country dances" in this way, the townspeople not having the time, or being too numerous to form a good company for themselves. But they very rarely become regular professionals in the same way as the play actors do; they never perform ostensibly to gain a living, and the dances always occur on some fête day, whether in their own place or in the village to which they have been invited. Their instructor always receives a sum of money to recompense him for his trouble and to pay for the expenses of his troupe. Yein pwès are performed ordinarily in private houses or on a public platform, when it is a religious or special festival. A yein is a favourite way of greeting a great man, or an English official on his arrival in a village. It is not so expensive as a zat pwè, is more quickly arranged, allows the sons and daughters of the chief people to distinguish themselves, and lasts just as long as the person it is intended to honour pleases.

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16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

796 And, '*My mother!* what a lot of sweet rice! Who
735 gave that? Oh, I see old U Hman.' 'I wonder
792 what's in that tin box?' remarked one as he passed my biscuits. 'I hope it's coming to our monastery, any way.'

Thus the monks passed, paying no sort of attention, while the people knelt to them; and when the procession reached the end of the line of offerings, it went on without stopping, across the fields, the monks of each monastery going to their own place; and the givers of presents rose up and followed them, each carrying his or her gifts. And so they went across the fields till each little procession was lost to sight.

796 That was all the ceremony for the day, but at dusk the illuminations began. The little pagoda in the fields was lighted up nearly to its top with concentric rings of lamps till it blazed like a pyramid of flame, seen far across the night. All the people came there, and placed little offerings of flowers at the foot of the pagoda, or added each his candle to the big illumination.

The house of the headman of the village was lit up with a few rows of lamps, and all the monasteries, too, were lit. There were no restaurants—every-
[444] one was at home, you see—but there were one or two little stalls, at which you could buy a cheroot, or even perhaps a cup of vermicelli; and there was
796 a dance. It was only the village girls who had
535 been taught, partly by their own mothers, partly by an old man, who knew something of the business. They did not dance very well, perhaps; they were none of them very beautiful; but what matter?

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
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We knew them all; they were our neighbours, the kinswomen of half the village; everyone liked to see them dance, to hear them sing; they were all young, and are not all young girls pretty? And amongst the audience were there not the girls' relations, their sisters, their lovers? would not that alone make the girls dance well, make the audience enthusiastic? And so, what with the illuminations, and the chat and laughter of friends, and the dance, we kept it up till very late; and we all went to bed happy and well pleased with each other, well pleased with ourselves. Can you imagine a more successful end than that?

To write about these festivals is so pleasant, it brings back so many delightful memories, that I could go on writing for long and long. But there is no use in doing so, as they are all very much alike, with little local differences depending on the enterprise of the inhabitants and the situation of the place. There might be boat-races, perhaps, on a festival day, or pony-races, or boxing. I have seen all these, if not at the festival at the end of Lent, at other festivals. I remember once I was going up the river on a festival night by the full moon, and we saw point after point crowned with lights upon the pagodas; and as we came near the great city we saw a new glory; for there was a boat anchored in mid-stream, and from this boat there dropped a stream of fire; myriads of little lamps burned on tiny rafts that drifted down the river in a golden band. There were every now and then bigger rafts, with figures made in light—boats and pagodas and monasteries. The lights heaved with

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER I

THE ORIGINS OF BURMESE DRAMA

1. Burmese Music and Dancing

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I have said that no Burmese drama is to be found before the eighteenth century. The origins of that drama are to be found in the remote past of Burma's own national development, rather than in foreign importations or influence.

No doubt, Burmese music and dancing arose out of primitive religious rituals as in other countries. Society developed, civilization expanded, and contact with the Hindus and Chinese gave new ideas, but the native element always dominated, and the music and dancing remained, as indeed they still remain, essentially Burmese. In A.D. 800 when the Hindu expansion overseas was an accomplished fact, when the Hindu and Chinese civilizations had come into contact with each other, and when the rest of Indo-China had been drawn into the influence of those civilizations, Burmese music and dancing remained independent. In 800–2, when some parts of Upper Burma were under the nominal suzerainty of Nanchao (then a semi-independent State, now Yunnan), two Burmese deputations accompanied Nanchao missions to the Court of the Chinese Emperor, and the Burmese 'sang songs containing Sanskrit words and went through spelling dances, lining up in a pattern which read "Nanchao sends holy music!"'[1] The Imperial Secretary has left us a poem describing the occasion. The following is an extract:

> Music from the land of P'iao, music from the land of P'iao,[2]
> Brought hither from the great ocean's south-west corner
> Yung Ch'iang's son, Shunant'o.
> Has come with an offering of southern tunes to fête the New Year.
> Our Emperor has taken his seat in the courtyard of the palace.
> He does not press his cap strings to his ears, he is listening to you!

[1] G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 14.

[2] The land of P'iao was the name by which Burma was known to the Chinese until the tenth century (ibid., p. 11).

21: Htin Aung . E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
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At the first blast of the jewelled shell, their matted locks grow crisp.
At one blow from their copper gong their painted limbs leap.
Pearl streams glitter as they twist, as though the stars were shaken in the sky
Flowery crowns nod and whirl, with the motion of dragon or snake.[1]

The music and the dance were strange enough and pleasing enough for the Emperor to bestow minor honorary offices at the court on the leaders of the deputation. Burmese music and dancing continued to develop, and at least the music reached great artistic heights in the kingdom of Pagan, for the kings were its patrons; Alaungsithu, king from 1112 to 1167, was himself an accomplished musician, and introduced new notes and tunes. With all its developments, the music remained so national that when the great Anawrahta (1044–77) led a raiding expedition into Bengal and wanted to leave a sign that he had been there, he set up, not stone pillars as was the practice of most eastern kings of the period, but stone images of Burmese musicians. And when Alaungsithu, his grandson, later raided Bengal, he found them; and men say that the stone musicians played tunes as if they were alive, to the great delight of the homesick king.[2]

[101] Music and dancing could develop on their own without being overwhelmed by an already developed drama, as the Burmese did not know of the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, or the Sanskrit drama and its kinsman the puppet show, although Java and the rest of Indo-China, through their Hindu colonists and kings, had definitely adopted the Indian epics and the drama as their own by about the sixth or seventh century. This absence of Hindu influence on Burmese music and dancing explains why the Burmese are the only civilized nation in the Far East who do not possess the fighting dance—the dance essentially connected with the great Indian epics.[3]

[1] The extract is taken from G. E. Harvey, op. cit., p. 14.

[2] Harvey, pp. 30 and 48; Tin and Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, p. 114. Alaungsithu was a great warrior and traveller.

[3] A fuller account of the Sanskrit drama and the epics is given in chap. ii.

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
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have been celebrated year after year, at least since the reintroduction of Buddhism in 1056, and at least since March, 638, when an early king of Pagan, Popa Sawrahan (613–40), drew up the present Burmese era, the dawn of every Burmese new year has been the occasion for mirthful water-throwing.[1]

Buddhism had been introduced into the country through commercial relations with India long before the foundation of the kingdom of Pagan, but from the beginning it was only at second-hand and therefore feeble. The real religion of the Burmese before the reintroduction of Buddhism in 1056 was animistic, and they worshipped various spirits, known as *nats*. There were mediums, mostly women, who danced to please the spirits, and as the spirits were supposed to enter into the bodies of the mediums, sometimes it was believed that the spirits, and not the mediums, were actually dancing. Sometimes the medium herself actually believed that a spirit had taken control of her body, but usually she only pretended that a spirit had entered her, and gave an exhibition of acting. As the medium of each particular *nat* dressed herself in appropriate clothes, the spirit dances were essentially dramatic.[2] When Buddhism, in one of its purest forms, was introduced under Anawrahta, the great king realized the impossibility of attracting people suddenly to the new faith; so he compromised by recognizing the *nats* as Buddhist spirits and giving them shrines in his Shwezigôn Pagoda as its guardian spirits. When asked the reason, Anawrahta replied: 'Men will not come suddenly to the new faith. Let them come for their old gods, and they will gradually be won over.'[3]

So the worship of the *nats* lived on, and with the advance of

[1] Shway-Yoe (Sir George Scott) in *The Burman: His Life and Notions*, and Fielding Hall in *The Soul of a People* give detailed accounts of the feasts and life in the villages. However, as far as I have been able to find out, the Tazaungmôn celebrations have never been described in any English work.

[2] These dances are still performed on spirit-feast days at Taungbyôn (near Mandalay), a small town given up to spirit worship since the days of Pagan's greatness and perhaps even before.

The belief in, as distinct from the worship of, spirits is not alien to Buddhism.

The chief works on the subject are: Sir R. C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Nats*; Grant Brown, 'The Taungbyon Festival' in *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, 1915; the same author's 'The Pre-Buddhist Religion of the Burmese' in *Folk-Lore*, 1921; and G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*.

[3] G. E. Harvey, op. cit., p. 33.

So the worship of the nats lived on, and with the advance o
795 civilization the spirit dances became elaborate, for though the belief
535 was primitive, the people were no longer so. The dances benefited from the developments that had taken place in Burmese music which, as we have seen, flourished under the patronage of the Pagan kings. New spirits were added, and they were usually those of heroic princes. The dancers were now many, for the mediums turned themselves into dancing and music mistresses. The chief medium of each spirit dressed herself in the special dress of the spirit, but the junior mediums, who were equivalent to the chorus of án English revue, were in the dress of Burmese princesses. It is interesting to note the
[292] origin of this dress. The mediums realized the necessity of dressing
[565] themselves in fine raiment, but as everybody wore clothes of bright colours, the only solution of the problem was to don the dress of the court and official class, which the commoners were forbidden to
[536] wear by law, except during feasts and dances. When drama proper came into being, the hero and the heroine dressed themselves in the court dress, even when they were representing common characters.

3. Miracles and Interludes

175 After the fall of the kingdom of Pagan in A.D. 1257, Burma was
369 the scene of fierce civil wars, but the trouble was mainly in the
726 capitals; in the villages and small towns life went on in its joyous
779 way. Religion continued to spread in spite of the fact that the throne
538 of Pagan was no longer in existence to support it. Learning began to reach the remotest parts of the country, carried far and near by monks. To escape from the aimless strife of the civil wars, men turned towards literature. Money was lacking to compose poems in brick as had been done at Pagan, and men now expressed their love for the religion and their love for the beautiful in writing. The new literature further educated the people and made even stronger the already strong religious fervour. As a result, at village feasts and on days of public rejoicing, the people turned towards their religion for amusement and entertainment. So pageants depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha and from his Birth Stories came into being.

796 Pageants were given on ordinary carts that were in use for all
541 kinds of transport and which are still in use in backward parts of the
493 country at the present day. Each cart carried a group of (amateur) actors standing still and representing a set scene. Originally, no doubt, there were only a few carts representing scenes from different stories. Later, a pageant came to consist of many carts and many

21: Htin Aung B-5 (ca. 1930) 1957 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER V

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THE DECADENT PERIOD

1. The Drama from 1866 to 1877

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The years that followed the Myingun rebellion and the execution of U Pon Nya were years of distress and discontent. The rebellion had taken its toll of able men, and the king was left alone to rule a country, discontented especially for economic reasons. Lower Burma was being developed by the British, and the resulting increase in commerce with the west was changing the existing economic conditions in both Lower and Upper Burma. Naturally, the period of transition was one of distress and discontent. The English and French were rivals in their desire to gain control of Burmese trade relations, and the Burmese played on the rivalry by bargaining, making secret treaties, and asking exorbitant prices for favours granted, thereby denying economic stability to the country. The king was without advisers and a dying man, and as the eternal question of succession—the bane of Burmese politics—was improbable of solution, the English and French struggled for influence, and consequently, the palace was one mass of intrigue. Corruption was rife in the kingdom, administration was neglected, the judges took bribes, and robbers roamed the country at will. Amidst such adverse conditions, the drama could not flourish, and though the plays of U Pon Nya were still acted, studied and imitated, no dramatist of even moderate ability appeared.

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We have seen that from the beginning, song and dance were the main items of entertainment on the stage. Even when the Siamese plays were being presented at court and influencing the drama all over the country, the song and dance were still important, first, because of the earlier tradition, second, because the professional actors were in reality singers and dancers, and third, because the song was of great importance in the *Rawe* play. However, with the coming of developed plays, the dance was eliminated, although the song occasionally remained. In U Kyin U's plays the dance did not

21: Htin Aung E-5 (ca. 1930) 1937 AP1 Burma
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536* 535 appear at all, and the song had lost its importance to such an extent that only one scene in all his plays had songs, which was in *Doyse-gonben*, where the hermit and the two princesses spoke to each other in songs. Though U Pon Nya was a great writer of songs, not one appeared in his plays. These great dramatists, through their brilliance, made the audience interested in the play alone, and the professional actors had no choice but to follow the dictates of the famous playwrights. After U Pon Nya, through lack of interest in true drama and because there were no able dramatists, the drama fell again into the hands of the professional actors, who had always considered themselves dancers and singers. They continued to present the great plays and their imitations, but only as frameworks for their songs and dances. We shall see later that after the final flicker of the drama during the years 1877–86 it perished in the hands of the actors with their interest in song and dance.

536* 541 178 [171] The people themselves wanted song and dance. They wanted an entertainment pleasing to the eye and the ear, without taxing the brain. They wanted an escape from the realities of life, because they were weary of the present and anxious for the future, as they knew not what dreadful events the next few months would bring. They wanted new dances and new tunes, and they applauded elaborate dresses and brilliantly staged scenes; and the actors could give them what they wanted as, through the influence of English and French touring companies, the stage scenery and devices had developed by leaps and bounds.[1] They demanded both laughter and tears, but as they desired the drama to appeal only to their senses and not to the intellect, what they really wished for and received were farce and sentimental pathos. The spirit of the audience had changed since the days of the great dramatists. The drama came into being in the age of triumph, when the attitude of the audience towards life was one of serenity and optimism. During U Kyin U's time, disaster, in the shape of the loss of provinces to the British, had overtaken the country, but there seemed to be a promise of better times, and therefore the spirit of the nation was still serene. When U Pon Nya wrote his plays, more provinces had been lost to the British, but again there was a promise of better times, and the spirit of the audience remained calm and serene. But after U Pon Nya, the spirit was one of despair and anxiety.

[1] The development of the stage is considered in detail in chap. vii.